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sites of articulation - an interview with Larissa Lai

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Robyn L. and Lai, Larissa, sites of articulation - an interview with Larissa Lai 2005, 21-30.
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"sites of articulation"—an interview with Larissa Lai

Robyn Morris in conversation with Larissa Lai

ROBYN MORRIS. Larissa, though your fiction interrogates racialized, sexualized and gendered borders I'd like to focus this interview around the notion of racialization. Given this, you have noted, in a previous interview, that mainstream Canadian culture defines you as an outsider and from the outside, at the level of skin. You also note in this same interview that there is a lot of "stuff" you can see from the outside. Could you comment further on this?

LARISSA LAI. If I remember correctly, I think that what I was saying was that part of the frustration of growing up as a person of colour in a white country is that people have certain expectations of you on the basis of what you look like. This doesn't allow for a fullness of subjectivity that is admitted to you if you are born with white skin. This is not because of something innate in the skin itself, but because of the way in which one's appearance gets loaded with all kinds of culturally and historically constructed expectations.

RM. Do your politics of representation reject such a division, premised on and at the level of skin?

LL. Rejection is difficult. There's a very concrete and material history that puts a specific type of reading upon racialized bodies moving through space as opposed to bodies codified as "white" moving through that very same space. This sets up an expectation about what the racialized subject will know, what her experience of the world means and also how she responds to or articulates this experience. As good old Althusser tells us, how one is read affects how one conceives of oneself. "You know yourself by how you are hailed." I don't necessarily think that racialized subjects take on the cultural expectations of the mainstream in a direct way. We don't blindly mirror what the mainstream thinks it sees. I suppose it would be an overgeneralization to say that all people of colour have some awareness of how they are looked at, and therefore some kind of will to consciously intervene, however critical, or not. But I think Althusser was right in the sense that one has to recognize oneself in the hailing, even if that recognition is always complicated and always contingent. So I don't reject the division because I see that as a surefire way to bring it back stronger than ever. To react is to reproduce. But I do see talking about it as a large part of my work. To keep stereotypes in play, critically, is the best way I can imagine to undo them.

I want to show this complexity at work. I also see my writing as action, situated in time. Hopefully it is action that can change the way we

Larissa Lai spoke with Robyn Morris in Calgary, Canada, June 2003.

see and the way we move through time and space. I'm not looking for perfect solutions to racism. I'm looking for those little moments of intervention that work then and there. In that kind of way, I'm very much interested in a sort of "politics of contingency."

RM. Who are you writing for?

LL. That is a good question. I think it is important to recognize that writing is always pitched at an audience. That it always imagines and at the same time constructs its reader. In my fiction, I try to centralize the experience of people like myself. But I mean "like myself" in the loosest and most fluid way possible. Sometimes it can be racialized or gendered or of a particular sexual orientation. Sometimes it's reactive. Sometimes it's constructive. Sometimes it is a lot of contradictory things at once. But I am definitely trying to break away from a unitary Western liberal subject.

My first line of address is not necessarily a white readership, though a lot of "Asian" readers, particularly of my mother's generation, will say, "Oh Chinese people aren't going to get this." So I think of my first line of address as other people like myself; my own generation of younger Asian Canadians, women, maybe lesbian, maybe feminist, maybe not, but those who feel like outsiders for whatever reason. It's a kind of contingent essentialism of the moment, in which I centralize "likeness," whatever that means to the reader in the moment. I want to recognize that none of these things are fixed. Whoever gets caught in the crossfire of my line of address though, that's also fine. I'm caught in the crossfire of most writing in English. I'm very seldom in the first line of address. It's an interesting place to read from. In some ways, you could say I'm providing the pleasure of that experience to people who aren't conventionally put in that place. If it is interesting to them, then that's great. I think there's something particular about the novel, perhaps because it has played such a large part in the formation of various national psyches, that makes it construct its readers in very particular kinds of ways. It's always a challenge and always an experiment to try to undo that.

What my project is about is making a narrative mythological landscape for people like myself so we have something to hang our hats on when we come into the world. I want my brothers and sisters in "likeness" to have a better place than Suzy Wong or Madame Butterfly to hang their hats on—a place to begin to see their reflections. Even if they don't fit perfectly at least they can fit a little better.

So there are two things going on. One is the construction of the reader, which happens in the mode of address. The other is the production of reflections of various sorts. But my other investment is

in making sure that none of these things gets too solid, because to let them do that would be really just to make a whole other set of fixed types, which is what I want to move away from. Hopefully my narratives open questions—about race, about class, about gender for sure, but also about being human, about ethics, about action. I'm particularly interested these days in the figure of the traitor.

RM. In both *Fox* and *Salt Fish Girl*, you return to a past which interweaves both ancient Chinese mythology and European fairytale. Is this an instructive or explorative strategy in terms of your critique or complication of loaded terms such as “skin” or “race”?

LL. I'm trying, in my fiction, to move beyond the instructive mode. My coming of age, coming to politics, happened in a context in which a certain kind of didacticism was very much in play. There are a lot of earlier works by writers of colour, particularly by women of colour, that were written in an instructive voice, representatives of which can be found in early anthologies which contain many useful and productive discussions. They were very important in the particular historical moments in which they were written, and continue to be important as long as they aren't the only strategy in play. One of the inadvertent side-effects of those discourses, I think, was to both crystallize whiteness and to address it much more than I like to do. They also tended to crystallize positions of marginality more than I'm happy to right now. I want to emphasize, however, that I think those writings and those discussions were of tantamount importance at the moments when they took place. I just don't think it's healthy or helpful to stay there.

Fox was written as a sort of experiment to find another strategy. It wasn't meant to be instructive. It was meant to be productive. It was meant to open up a sort of imaginative geography that could be inhabited as opposed to articulated. The place that opened up was admittedly loose, chaotic and contradictory. I think that was the only way it could be, because to construct a literary geography that is tight, cohesive and coherent is essentially to produce in the service of nation-building. Nation-building and capitalist consumption! At the time, those were things I was very much interested in working against. These days, I'm still interested in chaos, but I think my chaos might include the nation, and the market—not sure, still working that out.

It's such a balancing act, you know. These places of production, even ones as chaotic and multiple as mine are dangerous. Productivity is always a positive act. And positivism, as much of the history of the twentieth-century has borne out, is a breeding ground for fascism. To stake out a place of belonging, however much comfort one gets from doing so,

is also to commit an act of violence. It's also to exclude. That's one reason why I'm so interested in the figure of the traitor. Our hands are always dirty.

The alternative is the much trodden path of criticality, which, of course, I do consider a useful activity. But I think in the identity politics of the early 90s, in Canada, the end result of too much critical awareness was to reproduce these dreadful hierarchies of oppression in the most destructive sorts of ways. You got all these radical people of colour competing for the lowest, most unhappy place in the hierarchy. I can't imagine anything more miserable. If a kind of positive chaos, inhabited rather than articulated, is the only way out, I was fully ready to go there. I'm sure there are other ways, but that was what I could imagine. *Fox* was my attempt to put that into motion, to see if it was possible to break out of prescribed categories, to produce rather than react.

RM. Is this why, perhaps, your novels are characterized by a generic intertextuality, a postmodern mix of science fiction, the mythological and the real?

LL. Unlike my theoretical writing, my fiction writing is never quite that deliberate. I think my stories come from somewhere behind me and not necessarily from myself as an individual. While I've thought a lot about both my own and other people's politics of representation, when I come to the page I put all that aside. My writing is largely an act of listening and, quite often, to many voices at once.

This being said, of course I have influences I'm conscious of. A lot of the work I was doing before I started creative writing was working with visual and video artists—I wanted to be a video artist—so I was looking at a lot of contemporary—mostly Canadian and American—experimental film and video, as well as a lot of installation work. I have a lot of admiration for the work of artists such as Paul Wong, Richard Fung, Shani Mootoo, Jamelie Hassan, Sharyn Yuen. I've spent a lot of time thinking about their work. I wonder if their visual strategies have somehow translated into an unconscious textual strategy for me.

I probably do have alliances with postmodernism as an artistic movement but I don't really think about my work in those terms. Certainly when I was beginning, I thought about postmodernism as a Euro-centric movement that I didn't particularly want to be allied with. Whose modernity was it that we were supposedly "post"? I found the notion of the "death of the author" particularly annoying, as it seemed to be widely in play at precisely the moment that many marginalized people were finally beginning to find their voice. But regardless of whether I took postmodernism on in an overt way or not, I suppose it was hard to avoid. I, and

many like me I'm sure, am as much a product of Western intellectual and political movements as people of so-called "European" descent. It's only that the trajectory of my lineage is a bit more broken and scattered. I am interested in the notion of truth as a construction. Is that an idea that belongs to postmodernism? Or, could it equally well belong to liberatory movements from the margins? The thing is, in the end, these aren't separate discourses. I've become interested in the way ideas flow through various communities at various moments, and how their use and weight changes depending on who is using them, where and when.

Politically, what I was interested in when I was writing *Fox* was exploring the multiplicity and instability of the notion of truth while also producing a subjectivity that doesn't seem to have a stable site of articulation.

RM. Could you comment on the trope of rebirth which is present in both your novels?

LL. A good question also, as I don't think I've fully registered that I've been doing this. But now that you say it, yes, it is something that seems to keep coming up for me. Perhaps what I was thinking is that the chance to come back, to be reborn, works well with the idea of experiment, that you can keep trying until something desirable comes of it. This allows me a sense of hopefulness that I really want to have.

In *Fox*, the logic worked something like this: if we keep revisiting and returning to the same life over and over again, maybe we can bring knowledge of the past to bear on our actions the second or third or fourth time around. I imagine that this might be possible whether or not our memories of previous lives are conscious or not. If we're doomed to repeat the past, perhaps at least we can have Butler's repetition with a difference?

In many ways, *Salt Fish Girl* is a much darker book. I'm thinking a lot more in terms of systems and a lot less in terms of individual capability, individual power. Nu Wa and Miranda are both implicated in systems they cannot control. The future is more violent than the past. Hope lies in the random—the idea that even out of the worst situations, sometimes mutations occur in a liberatory direction. You get this with the Sonias, the cloned women who somehow escape and manage to reproduce without the intervention of the corporation. It's not about having learned anything, consciously or subconsciously. It's about a bit of will and a bit of luck. Or a lot of luck even—what the Sonias have done is in some ways quite miraculous—to have achieved this sort of superhuman fertility beyond anything technoscience could ever bestow. It's a breaking out beyond the imagination of the technology itself.

RM. How important then is the notion of female storytelling to this notion of “breaking out” of a colonialist-technology based-Euro/phallogentric discourse?

LL. As I was saying in response to your first question, I think there is something important about locating myself and though I don’t declare it as located, it is. There is more a sense of situating in *Fox*, but there is an awareness of writing from a racialized and gendered position in both novels. I don’t think about storytelling as a civilizing force, as a way of imposing an ethics, a morality. I am aware of trying to normalize things that don’t regularly get normalized. In my work I’m interested in things that get left over, shut out; things that people don’t want to see, hear, and smell. You’ll notice that things fall apart because of the weaknesses of my characters: Miranda betrays her father, and Nu Wa can’t be there for the Salt Fish Girl in the end. My work is not meant to present heroic figures.

RM. Do your characters’ inadequacies, their foibles, make them more human?

LL. I think so—it does make them human, less than heroic. I don’t want them to be heroes. I find that those stories of heroic women of colour have a false and irritating ring. They are not about us, how we move through the world, how we get scared, make mistakes or behave selfishly. This is evident even in my characters that aren’t human, like the Fox. I suppose this is also a response to second-wave feminism that wants to posit powerful women as a way of countering patriarchal representations of woman-as-victim. Again, I’m not saying this wasn’t an important move, but it was a reactive one. Can we only be free if we are heroes? Do we deserve our freedom only if our actions are heroic? This is an important question if you think about the way racism often gets played out, especially in the so-called liberal democracies of the West. We’re all granted equal rights until we step out of line. But the law, once it’s been broken, invariably comes down heavier on people of colour, women, queers, the working class, and the poor. So it’s precisely at the points of our weaknesses that we most need affirmation and empowerment.

There is also another sense in which I want to think about the way power works. It’s never the case that one party has all the power and the other parties have none. Without a doubt there are some entities that have way too much power. But even the most oppressed of us have power and use it irresponsibly—including Miranda, the poetess, Artemis, the Fox, the Sonias or Evie. What, my novels ask, does it mean then to have this power and what is an empowered position? Is there an ethical way of using this power? Is there a fundamental difference between the kind

of power exercised by oppressors and the kind of power exercised by the oppressed? In other words, is it merely a question of quantity, or is there a qualitative difference? Though the novels might ask this, they don't offer definitive solutions. What they do say however, is that we aren't these perfect objects of repression. We do have subjectivity. We do have access to power—it's just different from power that men have access to, that white people have access to. Maybe it's more useful to think in Foucauldian terms—about power as something that circulates. How does that circulation work? Does power have a different quality at different nodes?

RM. There is a scene in *Blade Runner*, which you refer to in *Fox*, which encapsulates this notion of power. In the *Blade Runner* world of 2019 Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) appears to run across the heads of Hari Krishnas, Jews, Muslims, Hispanics and punks who not only mingle at street level but are fully visible to the police vehicles hovering above them. Do you think of this scene as a contemporary division of skin difference, of the way in which whiteness makes itself elevated but invisibly powerful while otherness is coloured and visible?

LL. I think there is, in a lot of contemporary science fiction, a reproduction of the raced body and of whiteness that is unquestioned. It also works the same way in historical fictions and other kinds of fiction. I find this frustrating and irritating. I've recently been thinking about the way in which genre fiction in general works—I've been writing about the figure of the detective in Kazuo Ishiguro's work. But of course, Deckard in *Blade Runner* is also a detective of sorts. What is apparent in the work of Ishiguro is that the detective figure's ability to solve the crime is directly connected to his racial purity. This is a problem for Deckard too, though in a different kind of way from Ishiguro's Banks. Deckard is not a figure of purity at all. He fights dirty, and may even be a replicant. Roy Batty, on the other hand, as a sort of Nietzschean superman, is purer than pure. His bright whiteness is highly over-determined. So on the one hand, the film does replicate a sort of multicultural notion of racial diversity, as in the scene you describe, with the universal (white) man still at its centre, and on the other hand, it does crack it open, which is part of what makes that film so interesting. *Star Trek*, especially "Deep Space Nine," is another example of the liberal whitewash you're describing.

It was an interesting exercise to write a science fiction piece in which the protagonist is not that white, human, good, man. I'm interested, especially in *Salt Fish Girl*, in this whole relatively recent circulation of the figure of the Asian as a figure that belongs to this mythologized future. I think it is very interesting how all science fictions, including

mine, are recirculations of myth. A site outside of time, a conflation of past and future, a site that belongs to the other because it isn't here and now. *Salt Fish Girl* explores how race can work in futuristic texts.

RM. How do you think whiteness functions to normalize or (un)race itself?

LL. While I haven't done a lot of reading about whiteness I've done a lot of watching. I think the most primary and effective way it works is by declaring itself to be universal when it is not. It uses the power of the universal as a cloak of invisibility to parade around in. This cloak allows whiteness to say that whatever works for whiteness should work for everyone, and if it doesn't, it is because of the deficiency of the other. At the level of the body white people aren't white, they're sort of pink and beige; similarly, black people aren't black, they're more brown. We call them "black" and "white" and invest them with certain moral expectations. At the level of the visual this isn't as easy. So we use language to code the visual, and I think it very much affects the way we relate to one another.

If the effect of my fiction is to centralize somebody of my description, it would be interesting if whiteness did become marginalized as a sort of side-effect. But I don't think the language is constructed that way. It might be interesting for whiteness to find itself not at the centre of a narrative. But this is not the primary motive of my work.

It was interesting watching the 1994 conference *Writing thru Race* unfold, and white power freak out at this notion that it might not be at the centre of this discourse. All that the conference wanted was to centralize somebody else—not that it actually ever had the chance. There was an intense backlash in the pages of some of the country's major publications, in which a few white male journalists complained vehemently about being marginalized. These articles merely had the effect of centralizing the experiences of those whose experiences are always centralized, and worse, without them ever having to declare that that was what they were doing. That's the power of the universal (white) man.

RM. How important was *Writing thru Race* to your own practice of writing?

LL. It was and it wasn't. I was one of the organizers and I had been doing this type of work for four or five years previous. I guess it was formative in its omissions, in the things that we dreamed of doing when we were putting the conference together, the things that got side-tracked by the backlash. I don't think that the anti-racist movement of that moment got much further than being able to articulate the way in which marginalization has worked in this country. This is obviously a very useful thing,

but in terms of trying to imagine another way of living, in terms of trying to undo the effects of assimilation, or empower people after the fact of assimilation (since I don't think history can ever be "undone"), there wasn't really much of a chance of that. That was what the hijacking of the conference shut down. What was shut down was a real possibility for the voices of writers of colour and First Nations writers to blossom. Instead what we got was a bunch of white men whining in the pages of the *Globe and Mail* about how they were being excluded.

There were, of course, a number of writers of colour and First Nations writers who did produce some pretty amazing work after Writing thru Race. But *Fox* was already well under way before we'd even begun working on the conference. So too, I think, was Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, which was published in the same year as the conference.

What am I trying to say? Not that the conference wasn't fruitful—I think that it was. I heard that it was afterwards, from people who had attended, but whom I didn't get the chance to speak to during the event itself. But I refuse to buy into the idea that it's only through abuse and trauma that good art or good writing can be produced. That's not what I want for myself or any of the creative people that I know.

RM. The media was used then to perpetuate white power?

LL. Yes, while appearing not to do so. It perpetuated it using the language of democracy, freedom of speech, anti-censorship and so on. Very insidious. Robert Fulford, Michael Valpy and others' complaints about "the exclusion of whites" was predicated on a false equivalence of "whiteness" and "colour" with no recognition of historically specific relations of power. Similarly, the cry "we are being censored" is such a melodramatic mis-speaking, it would more properly be stated: "we are being critiqued." What was doubly frustrating for us organizers was the fact that "the exclusion of whites" made such a tidy but loud soundbyte/headline that it all but drowned out and made impossible the discussion of histories of exclusion and repression, which was so badly needed at that time. That was the discussion that, in my mind, ought to have been going on both at the conference and in the media. Was that discussion censored? No. Was it heard? I don't think so. That is the editorial power of white privilege and the editorial power of capital.

That said, I think we are now living in a much more aggressive, conservative moment than the moment of Writing thru Race, and the backlash that occurred around that conference was, in a sense, more progressive than what is happening now. You've only to look at the reaction to SARS, to Iraq, and all this discourse around the axis of evil. This rhetoric is quite medieval, it is regressive, we've lost centuries in just one decade.

With SARS there's the whole connection of Asianness to contagion and disease which, again, is medieval in its origins. It was always the other who was diseased. It is discourse that belongs to the Black Plague. Such a notion, in our contemporary media climate, is ancient, barbaric and unbelievable in its backwardness. All the discourse around the current war in Iraq belongs to the same era—all this talk about axes of evil, and just wars and so on—it's the talk of the Crusades. We're being sent right back to feudalism. At least in the moment of *Writing thru Race*, we were still talking about democracy. It was still a liberal discourse which belonged to the twentieth- rather than the eleventh-century. This worries me greatly. The concerns about race and nation that were so important in the 90s really need to be deepened and complicated. Yes, I still want to talk about representation. But I also want to talk about travel, mobility, the movement of money, goods and people across all kinds of terrains, borders and distances, about propaganda, about the manufacture and replication of violence, about fundamentalism, about war, about corporate greed.

Yasmin Lahda is the author of *women dancing on rooftops, lion's granddaughter and other stories* and a chapbook *bridal hands on the maple*. And "tender boon" is part of the novel she is currently working on.

Larissa Lai was born in La Jolla, California, grew up in Newfoundland, and lived and worked in Vancouver for many years as a writer, organizer and editor. Her first novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand* (Press Gang) was shortlisted for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award. Her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (Thomas Allen Publishers), was shortlisted for the Sunburst Award, the Tiptree Award and the City of Calgary W. O. Mitchell Award. In 2003, TVO's Imprint named her "One of the Top Ten Writers to Watch Under 40." Lai has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia and is currently working on a PhD at the University of Calgary.

Tara Lee is completing her PhD in English Literature at SFU. She is currently researching transnationalism and representations of the womb in Asian Canadian literature.

Joanna Mansbridge recently completed her MA in English at SFU and is looking forward to entering a doctoral program in the fall of 2005. Her research interests include gender studies, contemporary fiction and contemporary drama, and she plans to do doctoral research on Paul Vogel.

Ashok Mathur is a writer, editor and cultural organizer, currently teaching at the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design in Vancouver. His current project is a novel/installation.

Cindy Mochizuki is visual artist who enjoys playing with mediums of video, installation, performance, drawing and writing. Ghosts, birds, letters and offices are some reoccurring themes in her work. She is currently working on her MFA in Interdisciplinary Studies at SFU, where she is accumulating a series of works around trauma and cultural memory.

Robyn Morris teaches in the School of English Literatures, Philosophy & Languages at the University of Wollongong where she is currently completing her PhD. Her area of interest is contemporary Asian Canadian and Asian Australian women's writing, and she has published on the work of Larissa Lai, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto and Simone Lazaroo.